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DOI:

[10.1080/17449057.2016.1190159](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2016.1190159)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Cooley, L & Mujanović, J 2016, 'Population Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Reply to Bochsler and Schläpfer', *Ethnopolitics*, vol. 15, no. 5, pp. 487-492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2016.1190159>

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Checked for eligibility: 04/10/2016.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Ethnopolitics* on 16/06/2016, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17449057.2016.1190159>

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Laurence Cooley and Jasmin Mujanović. *Ethnopolitics* Vol. 15 , Iss. 5, 2016.

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Population politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A reply to Bochsler and Schläpfer

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Introduction

Political mobilisation around the census in deeply divided societies has received scant attention in academic literature. A number of recent studies, however, address the topic of census politics in societies characterised by significant cleavages between ethnic, national, religious or linguistic groups (see in particular Anderson and Shuttlesworth, 1998; Balaton-Chrimes, 2011; Daskalovski, 2013; Perry, 2013; Visoka and Gjevori, 2013; Bieber, 2015). These texts build on an earlier literature on the role of the census in the construction of identities (see, for example, Cohn, 1987, pp. 224-54; Hirschman, 1987; Anderson, 1991, pp. 163-85; Hirsch, 1997; Kertzer and Arel, 2002a). Visoka and Gjevori (2013, p. 481) note that, in multi-ethnic societies, the statistics that emerge from the census often have implications for group entitlements, which raises the stakes involved in census politics. As Kertzer and Arel put it, ‘the pursuit of entitlement translates into a contest for achieving the “right” numbers’ (2002b, p. 30). This is perhaps most obviously the case in consociational democracies, where political

power is shared between groups and mechanisms exist to ensure proportionality between those groups in the distribution of political posts and public-sector jobs. In consociational democracies, we often observe highly politicised censuses. In Lebanon, for instance, the issue is so sensitive that no census has been held since 1932, despite widespread acknowledgment that there has been significant demographic change since then, and political representation is still loosely based on population shares from that 1932 census – albeit with the representation ratios of the 1943 National Pact modified somewhat by the 1989 Taif Agreement (Faour, 2007).

The starting point for Daniel Bochsler and Basil Schlöpfer's recent article, 'An Indirect Approach to Map Ethnic Identities in Post-conflict Societies', is that contention surrounding the census in another consociational democracy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, has resulted in a lack of available official data on the ethnic distribution of the country's population. For most of the post-war era in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the only available state-wide data on ethnicity was from the last Yugoslav census, held in 1991. It was only in 2013 that the first post-war census was held – some 18 years after the end of the war, which had resulted in the death or displacement of a significant proportion of the country's population. This census was delayed from its originally planned date of 2011, amidst controversy about the wording of its questions on ethnicity/nationality, religion and mother tongue, as well as the very inclusion of these questions. In the run-up to the count, various ethnically partisan campaigns urged Bosnians to identify as Bosniak/Serb/Croat, while a rival campaign urged them to reject these labels in favour of an inclusive, civic-oriented 'Bosnian and Herzegovinian' label (Perry, 2013; Sito-Sucic, 2013). While basic population data from the 2013 count has been published, the full results including data on the ethnic composition of the population, which were due to be published by February 2015, have yet to be released due to a dispute between the statistical agencies of the country's two federal entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska (Jukic, 2015b; Toe, 2015).

In order to address the lack of reliable statistics on ethnicity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bochsler and Schläpfer propose a method of estimating the distribution of ethnic identities in the population of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (their analysis does not cover the Republika Srpska), based on the total population of each municipality, the total number of children born in each municipality, and the ethnic identity (Bosniak, Serb, Croat or ‘other’) of the parents of those newly born children, as recorded in birth registration statistics. Their model controls for a number of other demographic and socio-economic variables, and takes into account the fact that birth rates are likely to vary by ethnic group. The model allows them to estimate the proportion of the total population of each of the Federation’s municipalities that are Bosniak, Serb, Croat or ‘other’ for the years 2008, 2009 and 2010. Bochsler and Schläpfer subject the results to a number of reliability and validity tests, which demonstrate that their estimates outperform previous estimates of ethnic diversity that were produced by the Federation’s statistical office and by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

We are not specialists in statistical methods, and our intention here is not to question the particular method employed by Bochsler and Schläpfer to produce their estimates. Rather, in this reply, we seek to highlight a number of issues raised by their article, the discussion of which we hope might form the basis for productive debate on the *politics* not only of the census in deeply divided societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also of conducting research on such societies. Our contribution concerns two issues: firstly, whether it is possible to produce estimates of the ethnic composition of the population free from the same politics that affects the official census; and secondly, what the purpose of producing such estimates might be. In other words, who counts, who is counted, and why, strike us as critical but neglected dimensions of this debate.

On the first of these issues, the parents' ethnicity recorded as part of the birth registration statistics that Bochsler and Schläpfer utilise for their estimates is supposed to be recorded by the relevant state official as reported by the parents themselves. However, as Bochsler and Schläpfer (2015, p. 7) acknowledge, in some instances when the parents do not identify with one of the country's three 'constituent peoples' (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats), the officials concerned select one of these groups based on the names of the parents. This is reminiscent of a 2002 census that was conducted in the Federation, in which some enumerators encouraged those self-identifying simply as 'Bosnian', for example, to instead record their ethnicity as corresponding to one of the officially recognised groups by posing the question, 'But what are you really?' (Markowitz, 2007, pp. 58-59). This is a particularly obvious demonstration of the 'disciplinary' nature of the census (Curtis, 2001, p. 26), illustrating Benedict Anderson's claim that 'the fiction of the census is that everyone is in it and that everyone has one – and only one – extremely clear place' (1991, p. 166). Moreover, as illustrated by the case of Faruk Salaka, a toddler registered in 2015 by his father as a 'Bosnian' rather than as one of the ethnic constituent peoples after a lengthy legal process that won him the label of 'first Bosnian born after 22 years', the obstacles faced by those not wishing to participate in existing enumeration exercises are significant and discriminatory (Jukic, 2015a).

But even beyond the census, as Markowitz notes, those Bosnians who do not identify with one of the three constituent peoples have faced discrimination when trying to gain employment in the public sector, or to access mortgages or students loans and scholarships. Moreover, only self-identified Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats are eligible to stand for election to the state presidency, which rotates between representatives of each of the constituent peoples. Not only might the statistics that Bochsler and Schläpfer rely on for their estimates have involved attempts by the state to ethnically categorise new-born babies contrary to their parents' self-identification, then, but even in the majority of cases where parents have self-

identified, they are doing so under broader societal conditions that encourage compliance with the state's preferred categorisation.

An alternative to the reliance on state-imposed or encouraged identity categorisations might be to employ a bottom-up approach to understanding ethnic identification. Here, Eleanor Knott's work on Crimea and Moldova is worthy of mention. Knott argues that '[s]urveys and censuses lack deep engagement with everyday actors and can indicate less about the actors themselves than about the way in which researchers want to collect data that fit with their pre-existing notions of how categories function' (2015, p. 472), and she instead employs ethnography in order to inductively derive categories of identification. Knott's respondents in the Crimean case, for example, identified in a variety of different ways, which often mixed Russian and Ukrainian identities, allowing her to derive five categories (discriminated Russians, ethnic Russians, political Ukrainians, Crimeans and ethnic Ukrainians), illustrating how they 'experienced, constructed, and/or subverted...mutually exclusive census categories' (2015, p. 475). This is significant, because it demonstrates how problematic it is that scholars often implicitly reproduce the assumptions of prevailing sectarian blocs in divided societies when they suggest that ethnic identities are static and mutually exclusive. In reality, as in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic and civic identities interact in complex ways, often with contradictory political and social implications (Sarajlić, 2012). And this is to say nothing of other identities that may be still more significant to a person's everyday experiences, such as sexual orientation and/or (dis)ability.

More broadly, we might argue that *any* attempt to categorise a population is inherently political. As Curtis argues, censuses 'provide resources that sustain or run counter to political projects' (2001, p. 28). Curtis elaborates on this point by claiming that 'censuses are not "taken", they are *made*. They are made through practices that do not simply reflect but that also discipline and organize social relations' (emphasis in original). Following this line of thinking,

Curtis dismisses concerns with the ‘accuracy’ of census making, arguing that ‘[w]ithout an independent knowledge of the object of investigation, “population”, we have no criteria for estimating the “accuracy” of differing accounts of “it”’ (2001, p. 34). From a theoretical perspective, this sentiment also echoes the canonical work of Benedict Anderson (1991) and Eugen Weber (1976), which trace the historical processes by which *states construct nations*, including the machinery of identity enforcement such as censuses, national literatures, symbols, festivals, and so on.

From such a perspective, we can view Bochsler and Schläpfer’s attempt to estimate population shares in the absence of ethnicity data from the census as characteristic of ‘statistical realism’, to use Labbé’s (2000; cited by Kertzer and Arel, 2002b, p. 19) term, in that it assumes that the task of the statistician is to stand above the politics of identity category construction. The problem with such an approach, however, is that ‘by mainly focusing on the technical aspects of measurement, it takes for granted the existence of the category itself’ (Kertzer and Arel, 2002b, p. 19). Seen from this alternative perspective, it is difficult to envisage a pristine estimation of the ethnic composition of a population, untainted by the politics that has overshadowed the census in a state such as Bosnian and Herzegovina. While Bochsler and Schläpfer (2015, p. 1) acknowledge that census ethnicity questions are subject to political contestation and may contribute to reifying identities, they then go on to uncritically accept the Bosnian state’s preferred identity categories when it comes to producing their population share estimates.

The second issue that we wish to raise in this reply concerns the purpose of the production of estimates of the ethnic composition of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and more broadly of knowledge production on this and other post-conflict societies. In the introduction of Bochsler and Schläpfer’s article, having acknowledged that censuses can be highly politicised in the aftermath of violent conflict and that the decision to include questions

on ethnicity is a controversial one, they then proceed as follows: ‘At the same time, the lack of systematically collected data about the distribution of ethnic identities in the intermediate period is a major obstacle for academic investigations that would require this kind of data’. The authors give the examples that ethnic identities can be related to clientelism, and that studies of political behaviour and radicalisation might require data on ethnic diversity. Moreover, they suggest that a lack of data has consequences for policy-makers, mentioning that ‘the distribution of identities can affect security and inter-ethnic cooperation and is a central predictor of refugee returns’ (Bochsler and Schlöpfer, 2015, p. 2). Having demonstrated their estimation method, Bochsler and Schlöpfer argue that it offers ‘many-fold applications for research’ and ‘might be used in studies that test hypotheses about identity shifts, return processes, registration politics and other ethnicity-related processes in the years between the war and the first post-war population census’. Moreover, they suggest that the ‘method can travel to other cases’ (2015, p. 16), suggesting application beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We view it as regrettable that the present academic environment increasingly places emphasis on the necessity of research having practical ‘impact’, and we certainly do not want to dismiss the value of research that is driven purely by academic curiosity. However, in our view it is also important that academics are cognisant of the possible political implications of their research. In particular, we suggest that Bochsler and Schlöpfer might reflect more on whether their estimates, which rely on official categories of Bosniak/Serb/Croat/Other, might inadvertently contribute to the reification of a particular vision of Bosnian society – that has been favoured in different ways both by nationalist forces in that society but also by international actors seeking to manage inter-group conflict – and in so doing marginalise alternative, non-ethnic modes of identification and political mobilisation (see Mujkić, 2016). After all, new kinds of political movements are emerging in Bosnia and Herzegovina and while they remain nascent, their commitment to moving past (the) ‘ethnic question(s)’ is a salient

phenomenon for the country, as well as for scholars of nationalism and ethnicity (Arsenijević, 2014; Gilbert and Mujanović, 2016). Just as these movements challenge the ethnicised nature of formal politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we would do well to reflect critically on our own scholarship, lest our research (inadvertently) undermine their pursuit for a better, more just social order.

Given the controversy that surrounds statistics on ethnic identification in a polity such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a danger in employing the country as a case study primarily to satisfy our own intellectual curiosity, rather than for emancipatory purposes, particularly if there is the prospect that the results might be co-opted by political actors for their own purposes. It is incumbent on all of us who conduct research on post-conflict societies to reflect on role of power and politics in that research, however well intended it might be (on this, see Rutazibwa, 2014; Fisher, 2015). This is not to dismiss the potential value of Bochsler and Schläpfer's endeavour; their suggestion that ethnic population estimates might help us better understand refugee return has clear progressive political potential. We would, however, encourage them to more clearly articulate what they see as the policy uses of their research – especially for those *within* Bosnia and Herzegovina seeking different modes and categories of association.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Jonathan Fisher for his comments and suggestions.

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